

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY PARIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3736
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY RABAT
AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT
AMEMBASSY DAKAR
AMEMBASSY MADRID
DIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 37976

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: FR, AG, MO, MR. SS
SUBJ: FRANCE AND THE FORMER SPANISH SAHARA AFTER
HOSTAGE RELEASE

BEGIN SUMMARY: RELEASE OF THE EIGHT POLISARIO HOSTAGES
DECEMBER 23 OCCASIONED GENUINE REJOICING IN FRANCE.
THE HOSTAGES MADE CLEAR AT A SUBSEQUENT PRESS CONFER-
ENCE THAT THEY DID NOT INTEND TO BE USED TO FURTHER
THE POLITICAL GOALS OF ANYONE. HOWEVER, THEIR STATE-
MENT THAT THEY HAD BEEN HELD THROUGHOUT MOST OF THEIR
CAPTIVITY ON ALGERIAN TERRITORY HAS BEEN SEIZED UPON
BY THE GOF IN WHAT APPEARS TO BE A COUNTER-CAMPAIGN
TO THE ANTI-FRENCH ATTACKS COMING OUT OF ALGIERS.
FOREIGN MINISTER GUIRINGAUD HAS PUBLICLY ACCUSED
ALGERIA OF RESPONSIBILITY IN THE BOSTAGE AFFAIR AND
CALLED IN THE ALGERIAN AMBASSADOR TO POINT OUT THE
CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN GOA DENIALS THAT THE HOSTAGES
WERE ON ALGERIAN TERRITORY AND THE CLAIMS OF THE
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FORMER HOSTAGES. HE ALSO SAID THAT A CONTINUATION OF
THE ALGERIAN PRESS CAMPAIGN AGAINST FRANCE "WILL NOT
PERMIT RELATIONS TO REMAIN NORMAL." IN THE MEANTIME,
THE GOF APPEARS TO HAVE DECIDED ON SELECTED DIRECT
AERIAL INTERVENTION TO PROTECT FRENCH CITIZENS FROM
POLISARIO ATTACK ON MAURITANIA TERRITORY. WHILE THE
RELEASE OF THE HOSTAGES DOES NOT EFFECT THE LOGIC OF

THIS POLIC, IT IS LIKEL TO MAKE IT MORE POLITICALLY RISKY. FEW WILL CREDIT THE COMMUNIST CHARGE THAT THE GOF DID NOT WANT THE RELEASE OF THE HOSTAGES BECAUSE THEIR DETENTION SERVED TO JUSTIFY A FRENCH MILITARY BUILDUP IN THE AREA, BUT IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THERE WILL NOW BE LESS POPULAR SUPPORT FOR A DIRECT FRENCH MILITARY ROLE. WHILE THE ALGERIANS HAVE COME OUT OF THE HOSTAGE AFFAIR WITH A TARNISHED IMAGE, THE POLISARIO MAY EVEN HAVE GAINED A BIT IN POPULAR ESTIME. THEY HAVE RECEIVED A GREAT DEAL OF PUBLICITY IN FRANCE IN RECENT MONTHS, MOST OF IT QUITE BALANCED AND SOME SYMPATHETIC. END SUMMARY.

1. HOSTAGE RELEASE. THE DECEMBER 23 ARRIVAL IN PARIS OF THE HOSTAGES RELEASED BY THE POLISARIO WAS A MAJOR EVENT HERE, A MOMENT OF NATIONAL PLEASURE WHICH SET A NICE TONE FOR THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS. WRANGLING OVER WHO SHOULD GET THE CREDIT FOR THEIR RELEASE AND CLAIMS THAT THE HOSTAGE ISSUE WAS BEING EXPLOITED FOR POLITICAL ADVANTAGE TAINTED BUT DID NOT SPOIL THE GENERAL SATISFACTION. SIX OF THE FORMER HOSTAGES THEMSELVES PUT SOME OF THE CONTROVERSY TO REST IN A WIDELY PUBLICIZED PRESS CONFERENCE DECEMBER 27 AT THE PARIS HEADQUARTERS OF THE LEAGUE OF HUMAN RIGHTS--A SITE CHOSEN BY THE FORMER HOSTAGES AS "NON-POLITICAL." THE FORMER HOSTAGES CAME ACROSS AS HONEST, DIRECT, AND CONFIDENTIAL

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LOW-KEY IN THEIR COMMENTS AND RESPONSES. THEY PLAINLY DID NOT WANT TO BE USED FOR ANYONE'S PROPAGANDA PURPOSES. SENSATIONAL PRESS STORIES ABOUT BEATINGS, FOR INSTANCE, WERE DEFLATED WITH THE RESPONSE THAT, YES, THEY HAD ONCE BEEN BEATEN AND KICKED AFTER AN ESCAPE ATTEMPT, BUT IT DIDN'T AMOUNT TO MUCH AND THEY HAD OTHERWISE BEEN TREATED HUMANELY, IF SEVERELY. NONE SEEMED IMPRESSED BY THE POLITICS OF THE POLISARIO, BUT THEY SHOWED NO RANCOUR AND SPOKE SYMPATHETICALLY OF THE SAHARAN PEOPLE. THEY SAID THEY HAD NEVER DOUBTED THAT THEY WERE BEING HELD AS HOSTAGES.

2. THE MOST IMPORTANT REVELATION WAS THAT THEY HAD BEEN DETAINED ON ALGERIAN TERRITORY THROUGHOUT MOST OF THEIR CAPTIVITY, FIRST NEAR TINDOUF, SECONDLY NEAR ADRAR, AND LASTLY AT A MILITARY BASE THEY COULD NOT IDENTIFY BUT WHICH THEY WERE SURE WAS STILL IN ALGERIA. THIS STATEMENT HAS BEEN PLAYED UP HEAVILY IN THE PRESS AND ON RADIO AND TELEVISION. NO ONE SEEMS SERIOUSLY TO QUESTION ITS VERACITY. MOST PAPERS--NOT ONLY PRO-GOVERNMENT ONES--HAVE BEEN CRITICAL OF ALGERIA. THE CREDIBILITY OF THE GOVERN-

MENT--WHICH HAS LONG MAINTAINED ALGERIAN COMPLICITY--

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HAS BEEN ENHANCED, ENABLING FONMIN DE GUIRINGAUD TO
CROW ON EUROPE ONE RADIO DECEMBER 28 THAT THE STATE-
MENTS OF THE FORMER HOSTAGES "CONFIRM WHAT WE ALREADY
KNEW. WHEN I SAID THAT, IT WAS CONTESTED BY ALGERIAN
AUTHORITIES; THEY WERE EVEN INDIGNANT. NOW ONE CAN
SEE THAT IT WAS THE TRUTH." ON THE SUBJECT OF FRENCH
ALGERIAN RELATIONS, DE GUIRINGAUD SAID THAT "NOTHING
IS IRREMEDIAL BUT THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ALGERIA IN
THIS AFFAIR IS NOW ESTABLISHED." THE EVENING OF
DECEMBER 29 HE ANNOUNCED THAT HE HAD THAT DAY CALLED
IN THE ALGERIAN AMBASSADOR TO POINT OUT TO HIM THE
CONTRADICTION BETWEEN THE STATEMENTS OF THE FORMER
HOSTAGES AND THE CLAIMS OF THE GOA.. GUIRINGAUD SAID
HE HAD WARNED THE AMBASSADOR THAT "CONTINUATION OF
THE ANTI-FRENCH CAMPAIGN IN THE ALGERIAN PRESS CANNOT
BUT MAKE MORE DIFFICULT MAINTAINING THE MODERATION
WHICH THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT HAS NEVER FAILED TO
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DEMONSTRATE. IT WOULD BE OF SUCH A NATURE AS TO COMPROMISE THE CONDUCT OF NORMAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES."

3. CONSEQUENCES OF THE HOSTAGE AFFAIR. IT IS TOO EARLY TO DRAW UP A DEFINITIVE BALANCE; HOW DEEP AN AFFECT WILL IT HAVE ON DETERIORATING FRENCH-ALGERIAN RELATIONS, FOR INSTANCE. IN TERMS OF FRENCH INTERNAL OPINION AT LEAST THE ALGERIANS HAVE COME OFF RATHER BADLY. THERE WERE MANY READY TO BELIEVE ALGERIAN PROTESTATIONS OF INNOCENCE AND IMPOTENCE IN THE MATTER OF THE HOSTAGES, BUT MOST SEEM NOW TO ACCEPT THAT AT THE VERY LEAST THE GOA WAS DISINGENUOUS FOR THE EIGHT MONTHS THE HOSTAGES WERE IN CAPTIVITY. THE GOF, PERHAPS BENEFITTING FROM THE GENERAL VIEW OF ALGERIAN DUPLICITY OR COMPLICITY SEEMS UP TO NOW IN FAIRLY GOOD ESTEEM. IT IS SEEN AS HAVING BEHAVED FIRMLY IN RESISTING EXTORTION, REASONABLY PRUDENTLY, AND WITH A CONCERN FOR THE HUMANITARIAN ASPECTS OF THE CASE. THE POLISARIO, STRANGELY ENOUGH, MAY HAVE COME OUT OF THE AFFAIR BEST OF ALL. THEY HAD NOT, AS IT TURNED OUT, TREATED THE HOSTAGES WITH AN EXCESS OF CASUAL BRUTALITY, AND OVER THE MONTHS HAVE RECEIVED A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF PUBLICITY IN FRANCE--A GOOD DEAL OF IT SYMPATHETIC. DESPITE GENERAL REPUGNANCE AT THE TAKING OF HOSTAGES THERE EMERGED A PICTURE OF A PEOPLE FIGHTING FOR ITS NATIONAL IDENTIFY AND THE RIGHT OF "SELF-DETERMINATION" THIS HAS STRUCK A SYMPATHETIC CHORD IN THE FRENCH.

4. THE EFFECT ON FRENCH POLICY. FOR SOME MONTHS FRENCH POLICY TOWARDS THE QUESTION OF THE FORMER SPANISH SAHARA HAS BEEN INTERMINGLED WITH AND
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OBSCURED BY THE HOSTAGE ISSUE. DURING THIS TIME THE GOF HAS INCREASED MILITARY ASSISTANCE TO MAURITANIA AND MOROCCO AND AUGMENTED ITS OWN CAPACITY TO INTER- VENE DIRECTLY. THERE NOW SEEMS LITTLE DOUBT THAT FRENCH AVIATION WAS EMPLOYED TO GOOD EFFECT AGAINST POLISARIO COLUMNS ON TWO OCCASIONS IN DECEMBER. THE MAIN JUSTIFICATION GIVEN TO THE FRENCH PWBLIC FOR THE FRENCH MILITARY BUILDUP IN THE REGION HAS BEEN THE NEED TO PROTECT FRENCH CITIZENS. WITH THE RELEASE OF THE HOSTAGES THIS ARGUMENT LOSES NONE OF ITS LOGIC, BUT IT MAY HAVE LOST A GOOD DEAL OF ITS FORCE.

MILITARY INTERVENTION ABROAD IS NOT POPULAR AND IN

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THIS PRE-ELECTION PERIOD COULD BE POLITICALLY DANGEROUS.
AT THE SAME TIME THE GOF SEEMS DETERMINED NOT TO BOW
TO ALGERIAN AND POLISARIO PRESSURE AND WITHDRAW ITS
NATIONALS FROM MAURITANIA. THE FRENCH BELIEVE THAT
SUCH A MOVE WOULD SERIOUSLY UNDERMINE THE STABILITY
OF THE OULD DADDAH REGIME AND, IF THAT GOVERNMENT
SHOULD FOUNDER, PUT KING HASSAN IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE
POSITION.

5. THE GOF APPEARS NOW TO BE IMPLEMENTING A STRATEGY
OF FORWARD DEFENSE OF FRENCH CITIZENS. WE HOPE SHORTLY
TO HAVE MORE DETAILS OF THE GROUND RULES OF THIS STRAT-
EGY BUT FROM WHAT WE HAVE BEEN TOLD THUS FAR TWO OF THE
PREREQUISITES FOR FRENCH INTERVENTION ARE A) A DEMON-
STRABLE THREAT TO FRENCH CITIZENS, AND B) THAT THE
ACTION TAKE PLACE ON UNDISPUTEDLY MAURITANIAN TERRI-
TORY, I.E., NOT IN THE AREA OF THE FORMER SPANISH
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SAHARA NOW ADMINISTERED BY MAURITANIA. IF FRENCH AERIAL INTERDICTION HAS BEEN AS EFFECTIVE AS EARLY PRESS ACCOUNTS SUGGEST, POLISARIO EFFORTS MAY BE DIVERTED AWAY FROM THE MAJOR ECONOMIC TARGETS WHERE FRENCH CITIZENS ARE WORKING WHICH WOULD ALLOW THE FRENCH TO FOCUS ON BUILDING UP THE MAURITANIAN ARMED FORCES. WE DETECT LITTLE OPTIMISM, HOWEVER, THAT THE FIGHTING WILL END SOON. SOME OFFICIALS MAINTAIN THAT THE FIGHTING WILL ONLY END WHEN MAURITANIAN AND MOROCCO CAN SO BADLY MAUL THE POLISARIO THAT BOUMEDIENE WILL FEEL THE PAIN AND RETHINK HIS SUPPORT OF THE MOVEMENT. OTHERS HAVE SUGGESTED THAT BY BRINGING TOGETHER UNDER ARMS SAHARAN TRIBESMEN FROM AS FAR AWAY AS NIGER, BOUMEDIENE MAY BE CREATING A SAHARAN NATIONALISM THAT WILL ONE DAY PASS OUT OF HIS CONTROL. IN THE MORE IMMEDIATE FUTURE, THE GOF SEEMS PREPARED TO ACCEPT FURTHER DETERIORATION IN ITS ALREADY POOR RELATIONS WITH ALGERIA.
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